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California Trip (1904)

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California Trip (1904)

Michael J. Newman

2015

In December 1903, Martha McMillan, her husband James, and their youngest son Paul (who turned 14 in April during the trip), travelled from their home in Cedarville, Ohio to Los Angeles, California to visit Martha's son Homer, his wife Mary, and their infant son Richard. From what Martha writes about in her daily journals, the trip was greatly enjoyable, but fraught with sickness and ill-health. What the entries in this journal do is show readers how sickness was dealt with in the past, which can also be useful for those studying medicine today.

Medicine in the early 20th Century was nowhere near as advanced as it is today. People got sick quite often, and when they did, Doctors came and took house calls. On Easter Sunday (April 3) 1904, Martha writes: "Morgan has his last meeting tonight but Richard is so very sick no one feels like attending - there is not any doubt as to him having the measles - for he is covered with them from head to foot. I never saw a stricken boy. The measles are serving him badly. Dr. Hunt here tonight." The next day Martha writes: "On account of the measles the 'folks are little shy' about coming around here." It can be assumed that Richard got the measles from his mother, Mary, who wasn't feeling well for about a week.

The first vaccine was created in 1879 for cholera. This is right around the time when Martha and her family were living in Cedarville, Ohio. But in the California journal entries especially, measles was definitely the biggest concern. It was highly contagious, and unfortunately, the vaccine for measles was not created until 1964. But on January 5, 1904, Paul receives a vaccination, though what for is never told. However, in the weeks following, Paul's arm continues to bother him.

Dentistry was also much different back then compared to now. On April 1, Martha writes that she had four teeth pulled, saying “These were the last of their “race.” Yes these were the last - I have not another tooth left now. I am planning for a new set.” Her husband also gets some teeth and some roots pulled as well. In the following weeks afterwards they have several visits to the dentist. They both receive new sets of teeth, though it’s not stated what the new teeth are made of, though it is implied that the new teeth work similar to the way that modern dentures do today. What makes this journal entry interesting to historicize is the fact that four years previous, the year 1900, saw the revelation that bad oral hygiene can be drastically altered and improved using fluoride. “In the early 1900s Frederick McKay, a dentist in Colorado Springs, Colorado, noticed that the teeth of patients from certain nearby towns were stained and mottled, and guessed that the culprit might be in their water. Other investigators traced the discoloration to high fluoride levels and noticed that many such patients had fewer cavities... Today fluoride is added to tap water, toothpaste and mouth rinses, and as a result baby boomers... will probably be the first generation to keep their teeth throughout old age” (Genco 26).

Towards the end of April, Paul receives another supply of medicine for his arm, which is still sore from the vaccination. This had been the first time Martha let a child of hers become vaccinated, which shows that she was willing to change and adapt along with the world. She was also more accepting of her own medicine. At the same time that Paul received more medicine of his own, Martha received her ninth dosage. Over the course of January to April, Martha received nine supplies of medicine, though it is never stated what the medicine is for. Meanwhile, Paul’s treatments seem to work fine at first, but in August of 1909, “Paul’s lung trouble returned” and he could not transfer to a new college like he wanted. Shortly after, on May 25, 1910, Paul

suddenly died after a rapid decline in health; it's not known whether the lung complications were related to the vaccination earlier or not.

On April 24, 1904, Martha writes "Death is the way to life. If I were to remain always in this world we could not enjoy the life beyond. Life is to be reached through death in the eternal world as well as in the natural world."

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